

News Analysis

The New Criminal Players in Mexico's Embattled Michoacan State

Details

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Recently released vigilante leader Hipolito Mora

It would be easy to think that given all that has happened in Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/9-mexico>)'s Michoacan state over the last few months, everything has changed. Knights Templar leader Servando Gomez, alias "La Tuta," entered the Mexican prison system, while the charismatic leader of the Michoacan self-defense groups, Hipolito Mora, recently exited it. But while the names of those who lead criminal groups may change in this Pacific state, the inertia of Michoacan's institutions remains the same – as well as the criminal groups that take advantage of this.

Now freed (<http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2015/03/09/un-tribunal-de-michoacan-ordena-la-liberacion-de-hipolito-mora>), Mora and other self-defense group members – released after spending time in prison

due to violent clashes last December 16 ([/news-briefs/mexico-vigilante-gun-battle-leaves-11-dead](#)) – will encounter a new positioning of the armed groups present in Michoacan. These groups, whether you label them "criminals" or "vigilantes," are prepared to divide up the scraps left behind by the badly weakened Knights Templar cartel, a deterioration that culminated with the arrest of La Tuta ([/news-analysis/mexico-captures-la-tuta-but-michoacan-struggles-on](#)).

Some groups, like the Viagras ([/news-briefs/viagras-criminal-group-disguised-as-vigilantes-in-mexico](#)), have grown stronger. They enjoy a significant presence in the region, as well as links to previously hegemonic cartels (including the Familia Michoacana, the Knights Templar, and the Jalisco Cartel New Generation). And the leaders of the Viagras, the Sierra Santana brothers, know how to skillfully exploit the use of force, presenting themselves as the ideal middlemen when it comes to carrying out violence. Such was the baggage they brought along with them, when they offered to lead a special section within the government's Rural Self-Defense Force, the G-250, which handled the search for La Tuta for a year (<http://michoacantrespuntocero.com/el-gobierno-federal-cree-que-somos-un-trap-nos-uso-para-limpiar-y-quiere-tirarnos-a-la-basura/>).

It's likely that those same criminal links that made the Viagras ideal for tracing La Tuta also led to views that the G-250 was problematic. As a result, on December 15, 2014, then-federal security commissioner for Michoacan state, Alfredo Castillo, and the Rural Self-Defense force (which the federal government created ([/news-briefs/mexico-launches-official-vigilante-unit-in-rocky-legalization-process](#)) in order to reign in Michoacan grassroots vigilantes groups) agreed to phase out the G-250 (<http://www.animalpolitico.com/2014/12/castillo-y-fuerzas-rurales-acuerdan-9-puntos-para-mantener-tranquilidad-en-michoacan/>). Another major point of the agreement was the decision to define territorial limits for the self-defense groups, a clear message to organizations like the Viagras, who are characterized by their tendency to break pacts when it comes to delineating territory.

It would be stretching it to think the Knights Templar are finished.

SEE ALSO: Mexico's Security Dilemma: Michoacan's Militias ([/investigations/mexico-michoacan-vigilantes](#))

This decision to dismantle the G-250 could have influenced the vigilantes' takeover of the mayor's office in Apatzingan last December, an event reportedly prompted by individuals close to the Viagras and the Familia Michoacana. In January, federal forces retook the local government building in Apatzingan ([/news-briefs/gun-battle-in-mexico-leaves-9-dead-highlights-vigilante-chaos](#)), the unofficial capital of Michoacan's Tierra Caliente region. Among the detained was a son of "El Chango" ([/mexico-organized-crime-news/jose-jesus-mendez-vargas-el-chango](#)) Mendez, an imprisoned leader of the Familia, who was later released amidst some controversy (http://www.milenio.com/policia/soborno_saca_de_prision_a_hijo_de_El_Chango-sobornan_a_juez-La_Familia_Michoacana_0_469753027.html). His role in the unrest is yet another example of the persistent criminal networks in Michoacan ([/news-analysis/el-chayo-dead-but-knights-templars-war-with-vigilante-militias-rages-on](#)), some well known and written off as finished, like the Familia, and others quietly active for years, such as the group led by the Sierra Santana brothers.

H3: The Bitter Rivals of the Knights Templar



Luis Antonio Torres, alias "El Americano"

One example of a criminal group that is steadily becoming more visible in Michoacan is the H3 organization. Headed by Luis Antonio Torres, alias "Simon" or "El Americano," also recently released from prison, H3 has been the protagonist in various confrontations ([/news-briefs/mexico-vigilante-gun-battle-leaves-11-dead](#)) with vigilante groups close to Hipolito Mora. According to Humberto Padgett (<http://www.sinembargo.mx/06-01-2015/1202796>), H3 was forged in the battle against the Knights Templar, and has close ties to Estanislao Beltran, the public face of the state-run Rural Defense Force and also supposedly linked to "El Chango" (<http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2014/855609.html>).

Like the Viagras, H3 has made deals with the Familia Michoacana. Nevertheless, there are differences between H3 and the Viagras -- the latter group already existed before Michoacan's vigilante crisis, and appears to associate with some criminal organizations in the region. Meanwhile, El Americano's group was forged out of the conflict between the self-defense forces and the Knights Templar. H3 has been sufficiently inclusive to meet with individuals linked to armed groups that formed before this conflict, so long as they are opposed to the Knights Templar, including one group, the Perdonados, made up of former members of the Knights Templar (http://www.bbc.co.uk/mundo/noticias/2014/12/141219_michoacan_perdonados_autodefensas_templarios_an).

The Jalisco Cartel New Generation: A Strong Local Player



Juan Jose Farias, alias "El Abuelo"

Other criminal networks currently operating in Michoacan are linked to the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG), a strong regional player well adapted to the state's new security situation ([/news-analysis/jalisco-cartel-evolved-mexico-war-drugs](#)). In another example, Juan Jose Farias, alias "El Abuelo" -- a noted member of the self-defense forces -- is known for his links with cartels (<http://www.noticiasmvs.com/#!/noticias/la-politica-y-el-narco-de-los-hermanos-farias-alvarez-en-michoacan-919.html>) traditionally active in the region. He is also the brother of the

former mayor of Tepalcatepec, who was among those affected by a failed judicial operation meant to round up public figures supposedly linked to organized crime, known as the "Michoacanazo" (/news-briefs/mexico-dismisses-judge-who-freed-michoacanazo-officials). It is possible that recent events in Michoacan will leave the networks allegedly built by the Farias brothers in a good position to take advantage of the strength of the CJNG.

La Nueva Linea: Steadily Gaining Ground



Roldan Alvarez Ayala

Another group with a profile similar to that of the Farias is known as "Los Alvarez." This group -- which some sources have called "La Nueva Linea," (<http://michoacantrespuntocero.com/habitantes-denuncian-la-presencia-de-un-nuevo-cartel-en-apatzingan-se-denominan-la-nueva-linea/>) has also bulked up their presence as a result of the Knights Templar-vigilante war. There have been reports published about this group -- which is also allegedly linked to the CJNG -- since at least 2012 (<http://www.quadratin.com.mx/politica/Atrapa-Ejercito-a-3-hermanos-de-ex-colaborador-de-Godoy-segun-Excelsior/>). The latest of these incidents was in Apatzingan, where some alleged members were arrested on extortion charges (<http://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2014/02/20/944861>). One of the key figures in this organization could be Roldan Alvarez Ayala, a relative of those who were recently detained, who has also held jobs in the municipal and federal government. He is currently wanted for embezzlement (<http://www.cambiodemichoacan.com.mx/nota-229652>).

What Lies Ahead for Michoacan?

It would be stretching it to think that the Knights Templar are finished. While they are weakened in Michoacan, many members could relocate to other places where they still have a strong presence. Guerrero is one natural choice. According to one report (<http://www.seguridadjusticiaypaz.org.mx/biblioteca/prensa/viewdownload/5-prensa/195-guerrero-atrapados-en-el-circulo-de-la-violencia>) which analyzes violence dynamics in this state -- which is adjacent to Michoacan -- the Knights Templar are present in over a dozen municipalities in Guerrero, principally in a region known as Tierra Caliente. This would be a dynamic similar to the Familia Michoacana's expansion (<http://es.insightcrime.org/noticias-del-dia/arrestos-muestran-familia-michoacana-sigue-activa-en-suroeste-mexico>) into this area.

The example above is illustrative of how the story of Michoacan's illegal groups is similar to that in Colombia (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/8-colombia>), where criminal groups are continually evolving (/investigations/bacrim-and-their-position-in-colombia-underworld). It would be difficult to assess how the vigilante crisis could affect public institutions, but it would be logical to think that many groups -- some of them illegal -- will try to directly influence local government (<http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/primer-plana/2015/impreso/sere-diputado-para-ayudar-y-defender-a-mi-pueblo-48858.html>).

SEE ALSO: Mexico News and Profiles (/mexico-organized-crime-news)

Two years after the creation of the Michoacan self-defense groups, the circle of protection once enjoyed by the Knights Templar has undoubtedly been impacted, with hundreds of public servants arrested (<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2015/02/24/politica/016n1pol>). And the formation of the Rural Self-Defense Force has legalized a process that threatened to drag Michoacan's institutions to the point of no return. According to the government's timetable (<http://www.cambiodemichoacan.com.mx/nota-242668>), the problem of Michoacan's vigilantes should ultimately be resolved by their incorporation into Mexico's "mando unico" police force (/news-analysis/pena-nieto-proposal-municipal-police-reform-mexico) (meant to replace the municipal police).

But this isn't a reason to forget that thus far, federal action on the militias has been more of a series of gestures, rather than a solution. The result of this intervention has been the temporary realignment of groups with criminal interests in Michoacan. In this infamously embattled state, the business opportunities available through organized crime don't end with the extortion (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/45-extortion>) so closely associated with La Tuta's organization.

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